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Review of the PhD thesis by

Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz:

The Trauma of the Holocaust as a Post-Traumatic Phenomenon in Israel-Poland Relations in the Years 1989-2020.

261 p.

The profound significance of preserving the memory of the Holocaust is more critical today than at perhaps any point in recent history, especially given the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies across various societies. This makes it imperative to confront rising voices that either deny the Holocaust or seek to draw a final curtain over its remembrance. For Jewish people, for most Israelis, however, this traumatic history is anything but forgotten, rather it is still very much permeates everyday reality. When one considers the scale of the genocide, this persistence of memory is hardly surprising: Of the approximately 3.4 million Jews, who lived on Polish territories, only around 50,000-100,000 survived.

In recent decades, the history of the Holocaust has been studied in great detail. Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz builds on the existing research literature and develops an innovative question to guide her own research: Her focus is the impact of the Holocaust discourse on the interrelations between Poland and Israel. Thereby she is primarily asking, "how the historical, social and cultural discourse is subordinated to the political and personal need of those in power both in Poland and in Israel and how they try to create a single and dominant narrative that has the power to shape reality in the present." (p. 8) In her analysis, she focuses in the years 1989 until 2020 and grounds it on speeches and interactions between leaders, political

events, social and artistic initiatives, and the activities of social entrepreneurs. She chose this time frame based on the assumption that it represented a time of close, partnership-based relationships between the two countries. Nevertheless, she also demonstrates that this period was characterized by conflicting dynamics: on the one hand, the Year of Friendship from May 2008 to May 2009, and on the other, the cooling of the relationship, which ultimately found its clearest expression in the so-called Holocaust Act of 2018, which criminalized the acknowledgment of Poland's partial complicity in Nazi crimes.

This project is not only of the highest scientific interest, but also of great political and social relevance. Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz has succeeded in contributing to a better understanding of the current situation – especially Polish-Israeli relations, which go beyond mere politics. That is a great achievement.

The thesis consists of five chapters, whereby the bulk of the empirical analysis is dealt with in the fourth chapter. The first chapter discusses the historiography of the Polish Jews from a particular perspective - that of Jewish historiography, above all the works of Simon Dubnov.

The second chapter provides the context for the study, where the author outlines the history of Polish Jews, going far back into history, even if she focuses on the 19th and 20th centuries. She pays special attention to the development of the Hasidic movement. She also addresses the major changes in the Jewish communities in the modern era -- the confrontation with the Enlightenment, the strengthening of Jewish national movements and finally the mass emigration to the USA and Israel towards the end of the 19th century. Separately, she outlines the development of Zionism on its various forms (practical, socialist, and revisionist Zionism). The final sub-chapters of the second chapter are devoted to the contemporary history of Polish Jews. Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz presents the First World War, Pilsudski's rise to power, the repression that followed, "the tragic years" of the Second World War and the Shoah and finally Jewish life in the post-war period as caesuras.

Interestingly, she hardly mentions the Jews in today's Belarus -- this is formally correct, but it would be enlightening to include their existence in the story. Particularly valuable are her reflections on the often difficult source situation, especially with regard to the Hasidic movement, where many primary sources were destroyed.

This overall rather lengthy introduction (around 80 pages) is followed by the third chapter, an analysis of Israeli-Polish relations during the period under investigation. It concentrates on political, economic and security-related issues. Here, it is particularly important for her to show how much supposedly factual statements by politicians were shaped by the presence of the memory of the Holocaust. She also deals intensively with the concept of collective memory. Theoretically, she underpins her argument on the basis of works by the most important memory researchers, such as Maurice Halbwachs or Pierre Nora and counters them with Barry Schwartz's interpretation, which resolves the apparent conflict between

Halbwachs' and Nora's approach. She also introduces approaches by Yosef Haim Yerushalmi and Michel Foucault, among others, into the discussion, in which she herself could have taken a much stronger stance in order to give the reader an understanding of what exactly her own approach to understanding memory is. This also applies to Marianne Hirsch's promising approach to post-memory, which is unfortunately only briefly touched on.

She shows how the post-socialist search for a national identity was increasingly linked to the question of the relationship to Polish Jews. For Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz the discourse on the role of the Polish population between victim and perpetrator culminated after the publication of Thomas Gross' book *Neighbours*, which revealed how Poles were involved in the murder of their Jewish neighbours in the town of Jedwabne. In this context, she also places the speech by President Alexander Kwasniewski at the 60th anniversary of the massacre in 2001, when he acknowledged Polish responsibility. The speech was followed by a reply by Shevah Weiss, ambassador of Israel to Poland at that time, where he emphasized the objective "to bring about reconciliation by confronting the past" (p. 115). The author explains how both speeches struck a clear tone and yet were obviously characterized by a "desire to discover" as well as a "desire to hide" (p. 115).

The memory conflict escalated again in the context of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in January 2020 in Yad Vashem. Polish President Andrzej Duda cancelled his participation due to the "shaky relations between Poland and Russia" (p. 118). The diplomatic tension, however, had begun already earlier as Lewkowicz Shenholz shows convincingly, for example, when neither the Russian nor the Israeli president were invited to the 80th anniversary of the invasion of Poland in 2019, which marked for her the "beginning of a political winter" (p. 121). This cold season was started at the latest with the signing of the so-called Holocaust law by Duda in 2018, which was followed by fierce national and international discussions about the distinction between a collective understanding of the "Polish people" and the individual actions of single wrongful offenders and criminals. The wording of the law was changed and the prison sentence was removed from the law in June 2018 as a result of the heated debate.

Lewkowicz Shenholz also addresses the fight on narratives in academia at the example of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, which was established in 2019 and had caused great controversies. Here the author shows how closely the political discourse was linked to that of the academics portrayed. It would be interesting to learn whether this was actually a rather homogeneous academic discourse or to what extent the discourse space also allowed for unexpected interpretations and approaches that went beyond the mainstream discussions.

The chapter also includes a discussion of the trips by Israeli young adults and military personnel that have been taking place for decades and put a strong emphasis on remembering the Holocaust. Each of these trips

included a visit to the memorial site of the former Auschwitz concentration camp. There is hardly a better way to illustrate how closely and vividly the Holocaust is remembered and how actively it is cultivated in order to preserve it in the collective memory in Israel. The fact that these visits to Israel always had an exchange component with Poland meant that Polish society was inevitably affected. Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz writes about how they did not leave the Polish participants of such encounters untouched either. The question could be raised as to what exactly these encounters triggered - did they lead to a greater mutual understanding, for example to a recognition of the complexity of attributions such as victim and perpetrator? Or did they possibly even reinforce mutual prejudices?

The analysis is complemented by a presentation of what the author calls artistic approaches to the topic in the 2000s in the fourth chapter. Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz concentrates on two museum exhibitions – the permanent exhibition at the Galicia Museum- a Jewish Museum” in Krakow and the joint Israeli-Polish exhibition “Demons”, which was presented in Israel – as well as on two feature films, the Polish “Damon” and the Israeli “Past Life”. Here, too, the author is concerned with questions of memory, in particular what exactly is remembered and what is not. Thereby she considers the Galicia Museum as an embodiment of the “Polish national obsession of no guilt” (p. 166).

The chapter includes many of the author's own observations and she shares her own perceptions based on years of visits to Poland. She comes to the conclusion that emphasising the positive parts of Polish-Jewish relationships was a “comfortable narrative that brings with it economic, social and political benefits” (p. 165). This is a very interesting observation that could be scrutinized even further. If this is the case, why could the various players not agree on this in order to generate the greatest possible benefit for both societies? Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz examines the exhibitions and films in detail and shows how they deal with Poland's Jewish history and how they situate the Holocaust within it. The author could develop this further by drawing even more on approaches from public history, which have dealt very intensively with representations in museums.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to memory activism, a term she borrows from the sociologist and anthropologist Yifat Gutman. Overall, the work makes use of numerous references from various disciplines. It is precisely this interdisciplinary approach that enriches the study. In this last chapter, the author presents various examples of memory activism and places them convincingly in the context of “moral entrepreneurship”. She shows how different actors negotiate the past with themselves and society, and which spaces they seek out and create for this purpose. The reference to the spatial dimension of memory is particularly compelling here because it is seemingly inextricably linked to memory and the respective notion of memory.

Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz offers a broad picture of the various dimensions of how Holocaust memory was negotiated in Israel and Poland. She

dedicates herself with extraordinary commitment to the difficult question of what is and should be remembered and what is meant or made to be forgotten. Her study convinces through its detailed knowledge and the high degree of reflection. At one point or another, more reference could have been made to existing, current research literature and the sources for some statements could have been indicated more clearly. A more differentiated approach could have been adopted, for example with regard to the distinction between "Jewish" and "Israeli", or the equation of "Holocaust" and WWII, or generalizations. It would have been interesting to learn more about the self-attribution and external attribution of "victim", as the study offers numerous entry points for reflection.

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Despite these areas for refinement, Lior Lewkowicz Shenholz's work is an impressive academic contribution, rich in resources and insights relevant not only to memory studies but also to scholars focused on Polish-Israeli dynamics, Jewish history, and the interplay of historical authoritarian regimes. Her comprehensive study has the potential to reach and impact a diverse array of readers, exposing dynamics that extend into present-day socio-political discourses. While Shenholz's thesis sometimes veers into overly normative or political statements that detract from its academic rigor, and occasionally includes protracted quotations better suited for a tighter presentation, these do not overshadow the overall scholarly excellence.

Given the depth and contribution of Shenholz's work, I endorse her for progression to the subsequent stages of the doctoral examination process as outlined by Article 187 of the Law on Higher Education and Science dated July 20, 2018.

